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THE CHARACTER OF VICTOR HUGO'S HERNANI

IN an inductive study of a dramatic character there are certain canons of interpretation to be observed, of which the following are the most obvious and obligatory. First, there must be organic unity. From all the acts and words of a given personage, from all the concrete details of his conduct and influence, and from the attitude of the other characters towards him, there is evolved a definite, single character, motivated by at least one simple idea or passion, as that of ambition in Macbeth, or patriotism in Horace, or chivalrous honor in Hernani. In the second place, the interpretation must be exhaustive, introducing all the details of the evidence, whether direct or indirect. The character of Hamlet, for example, is revealed to us not only by what he does or even fails to do, but also by the attitude of the other dramatic characters towards the melancholy Dane. In *L'Avare* certain aspects of the miser's character are made known to us by the indirect evidence of the children and his servants; as, for example, when one of the latter informs the avaricious Harpagon as to how he is regarded by his neighbors. Furthermore, indirect evidence is sometimes emphasized by means of character-foils or character-contrasts, as may be seen in the case of such characters as Portia and Nerissa, Antigone and Ismene, or Hernani and Don Carlos. Again, the field may be further extended so as to take in groups of characters, as a gang of outlaws, a band of conspirators, or a company of patriots. All these various methods of obtaining evidence may be employed in order to arrive at a just appreciation and an adequate interpretation of an individual dramatic character.

The first character in Victor Hugo's *Hernani* thus to be studied and interpreted is the hero himself. Hernani is not an abstraction, a mere type; he is a concrete individual, possessed of various conflicting passions and emotions and actuated by a complexity of motives. We have definite information about his past life and his present occupations and surroundings. When a child he went barefooted in the woods, and while still a child took an oath to avenge his father, who had been put to death

on the scaffold by the father of Don Carlos. The young bandit is beardless, haughty in his looks, wears a large cloak, hat, and leather cuirass, carries a sword, dagger, and horn, and changes his costume to suit the occasion. He is poor, but has air, daylight, water and rights; lives among rough outlaws in the high mountains, sleeps in the grass, drinks from the mountain torrent, suspects everything—eyes, voices, steps, sounds, and at night hears balls whistling in his ears, “Heaven made him a duke and exile a mountaineer.” He is called a rebel subject and is put under the ban by the king, with whom he is at war. The young exile feels that it is his imperative duty to avenge his father, and that, by pursuing the king, he is engaged in a righteous cause. To accomplish his purpose Hernani assumes the disguise of a bandit just as Hamlet assumes the disguise of madness and Fiesco that of the fool’s cap. In spite of this disguise, however, he does not become vulgarized but remains still a great lord, and therefore capable of hatred, jealousy, and revenge.

Possessed, then, of various passions and partly a victim of circumstances over which he has no control, Hernani naturally comes into conflict with necessity or fate, his own will, and the will of others. As a result of this dramatic conflict, we see him prompted by motives necessarily contradictory, and exhibiting many apparently inconsistent phases of his real and assumed character. In his double rôle of bandit and lord he undergoes a conflict between love and duty, is pursued by a profound sorrow, is melancholy, pessimistic, purposeless, vacillating, sarcastic, distrustful, jealous, hateful, revengeful, impulsive, magnanimous, chivalrous, possessed of a high sense of honor, heroic, lover-like, sentimental, poetic, fatal, a man of night, a wanderer on the face of the earth, *une force qui va*. In a word, Hernani is a romantic hero, incarnating by his double character of lord and bandit, the emotions, the passions, the aspirations, the contradictions, the doubts and the revolts of the modern complex man.

One of Hernani’s most striking characteristics is his melancholy. It is not the humorous melancholy of Jaques, nor the misanthropic melancholy of Alceste, or Timon of Athens, but it is rather the pessimistic melancholy of Hamlet, who, though he

feels that the world is not right, is yet, like Charles von Moor, unwilling to surrender to the wrong. It is of the Byronic type, and recalls the Corsair, the Giaour, and "the pilgrim of nature." He is a direct descendant also of Werther and René, and is cousin to the sentimental and melancholy heroes of Bulwer. He is at times gloomy and moody, and his misfortune becomes to him night, into which he plunges. He has a "sea of troubles" against which he is compelled to "take arms."

There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger.

His pensive melancholy is brought about both by his own mishaps and those of others. His will is thwarted by forces outside himself, and he cannot shake off this fatality which pursues him day and night. His sorrow becomes profound, and a black grief is spread over his life, so that he recognizes himself as an unconscious energy — *une force qui va*. His bride death awaits him and he forebodes a "sombre end to a sombre life." Hernani recognizes the "fatal finger on the wall" and has an intuition of his fatal destiny which "rails at him." Out of this fatalism grows his morbid melancholy, which leads to doubt, distrust, irresolution, weakness. As soon, however, as he is pardoned and his ducal name, his ancestral castle, and his sweetheart are restored to him, his gloomy melancholy disappears, and he is correspondingly happy and hopeful; but when later he hears the fatal blast of his horn in the hands of the inexorable old duke he realizes that he is not yet done with the fatal name of Hernani, and plunges again into darkness, melancholy, and despair. "The ancient wound, which seemed closed, opens again," and he dies. His rash act, though simply an error of judgment, made under the impulse of the moment, is followed by fatal consequences. His own self recoils upon himself, and, after all, his character assists in determining his destiny; and yet, at the same time, the element of fatality lends much to the pathos of the catastrophe.

Hernani is not only melancholy, but, like all sombre characters, he is distrustful and jealous. He is jealous of the kisses of

the old duke, to whom Doña Sol is betrothed. An instance of his distrust is exhibited in the pilgrim scene when Doña Sol appears dressed as a bride. The disguised Hernani sarcastically congratulates her and ironically admires the different articles contained in the casket, declaring, for example, that "the bracelet is rare, but it is one hundred times less rare than the woman who, under a brow so pure, conceals an infamous and false heart." When at length she tells him that there is at the bottom of the casket the very dagger she wrested from Don Carlos, who was trying to carry her off, Hernani falls penitent at her feet, is abundantly pardoned, and begs her to reassure his doubting heart. On another occasion when she appears unexpectedly at the tomb, he looks upon her with ill-concealed mistrust. It may be remarked, nevertheless, that Hernani's jealousy is of the Romantic type. It is not founded on any real proof or even on any serious suspicion of treachery, but is caused by his sick and troubled soul. It is not malicious like Othello's or Gomez's; to the contrary, the fatal bandit fears lest he might do his lover harm. Finally, in the pardon scene, when he surrenders the name of Hernani and assumes his former ducal name of John of Aragon, his jealousy disappears together with his other evil passions.

Stronger than Hernani's jealousy are his hatred and desire for revenge. For years he has nursed his hatred, caused first by the murder of his father by the father of Carlos, and again by the fact that the king is his rival for the hand of Doña Sol. To keep his childhood's oath Hernani has followed Don Carlos day and night for the purpose of wreaking his revenge. He expresses his hatred fiercely when he encounters the king in the very act of carrying off by force Doña Sol in order to make her his queen. Earlier in the action he hesitated between love and hate, but finally decided in favor of hate and therefore vengeance. Later, when Carlos succeeds in getting possession of Doña Sol, Hernani's desire for revenge returns and causes him to take the fatal oath; but later still, when he is magnanimously pardoned by the emperor, his hatred vanishes away, and his actions are consequently no longer influenced by his craving for vengeance. Lastly, in the catastrophe, the quondam bandit

realizes too late that his ruin is brought about by his failure to avenge his father, who, however, does not forget to avenge himself on the son that has forgotten his duty to his father.

Hernani is possessed not only of evil passions but also of positive virtues. In the pardon scene, where he has dropped the fatal name of Hernani and has assumed his real name of John of Aragon, his evil passions of melancholy, distrust, jealousy, hatred and revenge, are, as has been observed, all given up, and his noble virtues of love, magnanimity, and honor, glimpses of which had been caught before, appear in all their strength and beauty. Here is seen the antithesis existing between his real and assumed character, and a little later will be emphasized the union of destiny and character in determining his fate.

Among these positive virtues, which help to form the artistic complexity of Hernani's character, are his chivalry, consideration, and magnanimity. Though kings are not sacred to him, though his rage swells when a king insults him, yet he will not assassinate Carlos whom he has in his power, but breaks his own sword and with the chivalry of a Spanish lord bids Carlos fly and take with him the bandit's cloak, lest one of the outlaws, recognizing the king, might stab him. When in the pardon scene Hernani is placed among those whose lives are spared, he protests and claims that he, too, is a noble and should therefore be included among the unpardoned nobles. Time and again our hero shows himself magnanimous towards Doña Sol, whom he does not wish to expose to the rude life of the outlaws or to the scaffold by which he is threatened. He considers it a crime to snatch the flower from the precipice as he falls into the abyss. In the pilgrim scene, when he thinks he has placed his sweetheart in a compromising position, he pleads guilty of trying to carry her off from the old duke, but declares emphatically that Doña Sol is pure. In the last balcony scene, when Hernani hears the fatal blast of the horn, he endeavors to keep the truth from Doña Sol and seeks to spare her the agony of seeing him meet his fate. He considerably sends her away after a flask, and is startled at her unexpected return. After she has drunk the fatal potion, from which she suffers intensely, he tells Gomez

that a less cruel poison should have been chosen for the unhappy woman.

Hernani is Cornelian in his heroic love and high sense of honor. In the wooing scenes he is ardent, tender, sentimental, religious. For him love is something sacred, ideal, transcendental, a foretaste and foreshadowing of a spiritual union in another world beyond the skies. In his melancholy moods his love is the concrete real love of the Romantics, and not the abstract love or the mere effect of love represented by the classical writers. At one time the outlaw becomes so despondent that he declares to Doña Sol that Heaven has evidently not consented to their loves, and therefore he will surrender to her the heart he has stolen.

Still more sacred and heroic than his love is Hernani's delicate sense of honor. Like the true Spanish lord in the times of chivalry he is avid of honor. Like Hotspur he would "pluck down honor from the moon or drag it up from the depths of the sea." Hernani's chivalrous fidelity to the oath calls up the past, and is in that respect genuinely Romantic. In spite of Doña Sol's entreaties to break his oath, which she does not consider so binding as his pledge of love, he is inexorable, for he feels compelled to keep his oath in order to preserve his honor. He declares that he will not go with treason on his brow. Like Antigone of old he obeys what he deems a higher law and succumbs to a lower. While his body yields to death, his soul is victorious and "rises with his lover in an even flight towards a better world."

Our hero's most striking characteristic, however, and the one most frequently misunderstood by the classical critics, is his poetical temperament, due partly to his life in the mountains in direct contact with Nature. While the representation of such a temperament may be called lyricism and not drama, it is at the same time genuinely Romantic. The tourist in Scotland, the traveler on the continent, and the exiled noble in the mountains of Europe, all have a feeling for Nature hitherto unknown to poetry. The voice of "the pilgrim of nature" is heard in the land. Hernani's love for Nature is therefore natural and truly representative of the contemporary man of culture. Like other

Romantic heroes, then, Hernani expresses himself in lyrical language. Not only does he reveal his natural life and passions, but he also depicts nature and external objects. His lyrical passages are filled with real beauties and lofty sentiments, possessing a certain charm of freshness and immortal youth, and impregnated with the local color of the times. In one of their love scenes Hernani asks Doña Sol to sing to him, to enchant and delight him, for it is sweet to love and to be loved. In figurative and poetical language he says to Doña Sol that if she will command the volcano to stifle its flames, it will at once close up its half-open craters and will have upon its sides only flowers and green grasses. He loves the meadows, flowers, woods, and the song of the nightingale. In answer to one of his sweetheart's rapturous outbursts of poetry, Hernani exclaims: "Ah, who would not forget everything while listening to that celestial voice? Thy word is a song in which nothing human remains. And, like a traveler, who, carried away upon a stream, glides over the waters on a beautiful summer's evening, and sees fleeing before his eyes a thousand flowery plains, my soul entranced roams in thy reveries."

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